
The librarian's role in the provision of consumer health information and patient education

*Policy Statement by the
Medical Library Association and the
Consumer and Patient Health Information Section
(CAPHIS/MLA)*

Health librarians, because of their knowledge of and skills in the identification, selection, organization, and dissemination of information, play an important role in both consumer health information services and patient education. The role of the librarian differs depending on the mission and policies of the organization. Librarians' activities in this area are oriented towards the goals of producing a healthy society and assisting the individual in making informed health decisions. This policy statement, approved by the Board of Directors of the Medical Library Association, was developed by the Consumer and Patient Health Information Section. It covers MLA policy, defines consumer health information and patient education, and identifies potential roles for librarians in these two areas.

DEFINITIONS

Consumer health information (CHI) is information on health and medical topics provided in response to requests from the general public, including patients and their families. In addition to information on the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of disease, CHI encompasses information on health promotion, preventive medicine, the determinants of health, and accessing the health care system.

Patient education is a planned activity, initiated by a health professional whose aim is to impart knowledge, attitudes, and skills, with the specific goal of changing behavior, increasing compliance with therapy and, thereby, improving health.

CHI and patient education overlap in practice, since patient behavior may change as a result of receiving health information materials. Patient education and CHI often differ in terms of the setting in which the process occurs, rather than in terms of the subject matter.

ROLES FOR THE LIBRARIAN IN CONSUMER HEALTH INFORMATION AND PATIENT EDUCATION

Collection management

- Identifying available CHI and patient education materials for review and possible purchase.
- Selecting CHI and patient education materials for the organization including books, magazines, audiovisuals, pamphlets, computer databases, CD-ROMs, and Internet resources.

- Building an authoritative collection of CHI and patient education materials in print and electronic form that meets the needs of the institution or community being served.
- Developing subject file collections on current topics of interest to consumers, etc.
- Maintaining a current collection of CHI and patient education materials which are routinely reevaluated and revised.

Knowledge and resource sharing

- Networking with other individuals, organizations, and agencies to facilitate resource-sharing of CHI and patient education materials.
- Consulting on the identification, selection, and organization of patient education materials in health care settings, e.g. hospital nursing units, ambulatory clinics, etc.
- Serving on institutional committees that address topics such as patient education, public health, community health education, quality assurance, medical ethics, etc. to encourage and support the development of CHI and patient education resources.
- Working with the institution and the community to develop informational and educational programs related to health issues, e.g., weight control, living wills, etc. The librarian often plays a special role in identifying materials, locating speakers, etc.
- Alerting health educators to areas of concern to the public for future program development.
- Acting as a resource for health professionals who wish to develop consumer health and patient education resources in their practice settings.
- Sharing the results of their CHI and patient education experience with other professionals, both in the library field and outside, in order to improve these services.
- Supporting and encouraging the development of self-help groups by providing resources, making referrals to facilitate networking, and suggesting names of contact persons for programs, etc.
- In cases in which the institution has a patient education program, working as a member of the interdisciplinary team to meet the informational needs of the program.

Advocacy

- Acting as advocates on the local, national, and international levels to promote open access to health information for the public.
- Protecting the individual's right to confidentiality and unrestricted access to medical and health information. The MLA Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarianship, ALA Administrative Policies and Pro-

cedures, and the Library Bill of Rights promote such access.

- Encouraging the gathering of information on all sides of a question and on various types of procedures, both medical and non-medical, as a means of contributing to informed choice in health care decision-making.
- Advocating the right of consumers to access information independent of the patient education program.

Access and dissemination of information

- Sending information to hospitalized patients or community members upon request.
- Providing a current awareness service for health professionals about new CHI and patient education materials.
- Creating consumer health information centers that provide CHI and patient information resources, references, and referrals.
- Responding to interlibrary loan requests for materials not available in other libraries.
- Serving as a quality filter for consumers of CHI and patient education information.
- Creating and compiling CHI and patient health information resources and pathfinders that are accessible to the public electronically via the Internet and other national information networks.

Education

- Creating awareness for health professionals regarding the health information needs of consumers
- Encouraging the inclusion of CHI services in continuing education courses as appropriate and encouraging the development of new educational tools to meet emerging needs.

- Presenting educational programs on the effective provision of CHI for public and other librarians.
- Providing educational programs on locating and evaluating health information for the general public.

Research

- Initiating and participating in research on all aspects of CHI.
- Applying health information research to CHI and patient education activities.

While librarians are experts in identifying and providing information, they are not practicing health professionals who interpret information and give advice. It is important that librarians avoid suggesting diagnoses and recommending particular health professionals or procedures. The role of the librarian is to provide access to a range of authoritative materials, but he or she cannot be held responsible for the scientific accuracy or currency of all materials in the collection. Librarians' activities are oriented towards the social and community goals of producing a healthy society and assisting the individual to make more informed health decisions.

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